

African american athletes and their role in foreign and domestic policy



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Indeed, African American athletes were used as an intermediary in both domestic and foreign policy; they played a critical role in politics as the portrayal of the United States during the Cold War Era. This happened because advancements in African American athletes led to controversial perspectives of people around the world. Colored people struggled with racial discrimination, and African American athletes became the focal point for a myriad of historical effects. Sports in the Cold war were associated with unison, progress, propaganda, and a reflection of the nation's current state. Both the USA and the Soviet Union took advantage of such opportunities to sway the world's perspective on their own nation.

Jackie Robinson first debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 as the first African American athlete in the 21st century. Not only was he named rookie of the year- with a .297 batting average, most stolen bases, and leading the team in home runs- but he was one of the most significant figures of sports history. Jackie was a considered a " Moses" for black people, and similar to Babe Ruth, his success would transcend down to the sporting world. " Robinson's entry into organized baseball created a national drama, emotionally involving millions of Americans, both black and white," said famous historian Jules Tygiel. When Branch Tygiel signed Robinson, it was hard to imagine the potential Jackie would have in this world- especially outside of sports. In a way, Jackie's first season with the Dodgers was considered " another Emancipation Day for the Negro," said Sam Lacy, an African American sports' writer. He went on to say that Jackie on his own " represents a weapon far more potent than the combined forces of all our liberal legislation." Jackie Robinson served as a lighthouse, and he led the

way of 13 million other African Americans in hopes of new aspirations for the black society. Robinson's legacy was seen as a "one manned civil rights movement."

Everyone in the nation of all functions were eager to ask: "How'd Jackie make out today?" Many thought that Jackie's success proved to white people that if given the chance, African Americans were capable of exhibiting a solid work ethic, responsibility, and productivity. Prior to Jackie Robinson's timeline, baseball was a mere reflection of America's values of segregation. However, the appearance of Jackie integrating into such a sport in such a harsh time for blacks, symbolized the possibility of a brighter future where American values of the "land of the free" were truly feasible; a society without racial prejudice where it was a large concern during the Cold War. The successful integration of African Americans into baseball printed out a plan for the possibility of integration across the nation, and as a global model of equality.

Soon after Jackie Robinson's integration with baseball, President Harry Truman articulated the "Truman Doctrine" on March 12, 1947. This doctrine established America's point of view on Communism: with the support of the United Nation, 'economic and military assistance would be provided to all democratic nations under the threat from all external or internal authoritarian forces.' The Truman Doctrine became America's form of foreign policy for the Cold War. President Truman depicted the American way of life as a form of "free institutions, a representative government, guarantee of liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom of political oppression."

On the other hand, the Soviet Union was characterized as living under <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-athletes-and-their-role-in-foreign-and-domestic-policy/>

suppression of freedom, propaganda, and a life of “ terror and oppression.” This speech was a turning point in the Cold War in that it gave America a purpose as a model for other countries to follow, and a blueprint for global protection. The effect of World War II set Russia as a superpower that “ threatened the American way of life.” The Soviet Union was gaining major global influence- many people were experiencing the second red scare. The eastern bloc had been dominated by the Soviets, communist upsurges were prominent in countries such as Greece and Turkey, and US government officials were put under trial for espionage. This led to legislation in 1947 which outlawed communist parties, while Truman created a “ loyalty programme” which dismissed employees that were marked as “ totalitarian fascist, communist, or subversive” by the attorney general.

Although the legislation was beneficial for the national security of the USA, these “ subversive” charges were used as intimidation to African American organizations such as the NAACP. The harsh atmosphere black people were living under led to a shift in the NAACP’s strategy. Before the doctrine, these organizations argued that their goal to end segregation were connected to the anti-imperialist ideology. This is because as awareness of the Cold War increased, the NAACP had to realign their strategy to that of harmony with US foreign policy. For example, NAACP leaders such as White and DuBois dropped their criticism of America’s policy, and vouched that the US was the rightful leader of “ the free world.” Despite such claims, the African American society realized that issues with the Soviet Union “ left no room for the claim of commonality for African Americans and oppressed people.” Walter White, leader of the NAACP said, “ the promise of advancement for African

Americans came at the expense of muting their belief in international character of white racial domination in the early Cold War." The constraining policies of the Truman Doctrine led the NAACP to drastically change their approach to civil rights. Instead of finding a link between the anti-imperialist and civil rights movement, an alliance was formed with the president to achieve their goals. This resulted in an immense growth in the NAACP; from 1940-1946, the NAACP members grew from 50, 000, to over 500, 000 in 1946. Consequently, Truman released a report called " To Secure These Rights," which ensured the government would make sure black people's rights were not violated. Anti-lynching and anti-segregation were strongly advocated. " To Secure These Right," set an ideology for the future of the Civil Rights movement for the next 30 years.

However, the civil rights movement took a major turn when segregationists Dixiecrats were placed as committee chairmen that reviewed civil rights. This meant that any efforts attempted to improve African American civil rights were revoked or hampered with. This was detrimental to the image of the US; forty countries in Asia and Africa had declared their independence, and Russia's main aim of propaganda targeted America's practice of racial discrimination following the second World War. Many prominent figures in America's history (Richard Nixon, Eleanor Roosevelt, Philip Randolph) argued that the biggest weakness of America's foreign policy lied not in its established view of international relations with communist countries, but solely in its domestic approach of racial discrimination. " Their [United States of America] race relations was their international Achilles heel," expressed Henry Cabot Lodge. All colored people around the world saw America's

treatment towards African Americans as a reflection of how they treat all different colored people, and that was the Soviet Union's spot to target.

The image of America's ideology on racial discrimination severely handicapped the United States in its contemplations with communist countries. This happened to the extent where Truman sent multiple letters to the assistant secretary of state, Dean Rusk, referring to the recent events as a "national security issue." Dean Rusk responded, "There is no question the moral influence of the United States is weakened to the extent that the civil rights proclaimed by our Constitution are not fully observed in practice." Rusk observed that it wasn't the policy that was harming America's image, but rather foreign media that was the prevailing issue. Truman began a campaign based off Rusk's reasoning. Rather than resolving legal issues with the African Americans, Truman looked to reshape the world's perspective towards America's domestic policy. The US government made efforts to silence criticism of America's racism. Paul Robeson and DuBois drew large audiences towards their criticism of the nation's segregation- both were revoked their passport privileges. Jackie Robinson made the headlines once again, where his loyalty was questioned. He responded firmly with his main goal in mind: "his" freedom. "We're going to fight racial discrimination all the harder the cause our stake in the future of the nation is so big. We can win our fight without the Communist, and we don't want their help." After prominent African American voices were silenced, a group of young black athletes and musicians, were chosen to be sent abroad to revitalize the American image. By sending colored representatives from the US, it sent a

message to the world: the American ideology of liberation, and the support of colored people around the world.

An important representative of the Goodwill Tours was the University of San Francisco's basketball team. The team's milestones were 55 consecutive game wins and won the NCAA championship two years in a row. The team consisted of three African Americans, one whose defense was the team's most dangerous weapon: Bill Russell. The team went on to beat Guatemala's all-star basketball team twice and were invited to talk to the president of Guatemala. Their success in Latin America was televised abroad for the world to see America's advancement in racial discrimination. Much appraisal was given to the team for exemplifying " democratic" principles. However, the team was criticized for playing so many African American players, and even received hate mail regarding the issue. In response, the team increased their use of black athletes to exemplify the integration of America's society between blacks and whites.

Ever since Jackie Robinson integrated the sport of baseball, it created a chain reaction to the extent where African American athletes were discussed as a form of US relations approach. The State Department also knew that the audience wouldn't see sports events as an intermediary with political issues. Second, America's relationship with the Soviet Union continued to escalate, and sports was the only way for the two superpowers to compete. Finally, sports reached valuable audiences, and America wanted to portray a much more accepting image. Jackie's image in sports showed to the world that America as the " leader of the free world," was much more feasible. In 1968, a third of the NFL and NBA teams consisted of African Americans. With such <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-athletes-and-their-role-in-foreign-and-domestic-policy/>

advancements to the black athlete, prosperity was delivered to all minorities, by showing that any color was capable.

Although the symbolic prosperity of the black athlete was prominent, by the 1960s that symbol had lost its meaning since sports became more integrated in all perspectives. The idea of the black athlete was now seen as the norm, or “ part of the status quo.” People began to realize that the success of black athletes attributed almost nothing to the continuing segregation struggles in the United States. America had given African American athletes political power. The raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics winner’s podium showed African American efforts to reverse any progress made by the State Department. The raised fists were a symbol for “ black power,” and it would become a widespread phenomenon among colored athletes. Harry Edwards, the Olympics Human Rights organizer said, “ The United States government has taught us well. In the ideological wars with other world powers, the US State Department has time and time again used athletes- both professional and amateur- as political adjuncts.” This shows that colored athletes would no longer support the propaganda of racial discrimination progress, and instead were willing to fight back and show they were still tied to oppression. Overall, black athletes were harming the government’s program towards communism. African American athletes stood in unison to defy American policy.

Evidence behind this is the presentation of Kareem Abdul Jabbar, Oscar Robertson, and Larry Costello to the media. The two stars of the Milwaukee Bucks were asked to join along coach Costello on a trip to Africa. In the past, <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-athletes-and-their-role-in-foreign-and-domestic-policy/>

Jabbar had skipped the gold medal game for the 1968 Olympic Games and was asked if he regretted it. His response was the following, “ I have no regrets on that. The team did very well, and I accomplished what I wanted to accomplish by not going, so I don’t feel any regrets about it.” Once the news of the press conference reached the State Department, Jabbar was questioned over the game missed game. He reaffirmed that the game had a conflict with his scheduled classes in UCLA, and stated he was merely focusing on his academics. No comment was made by Jabbar when asked about the contribution of the civil rights movement towards the missed game.

However, in 1967 Kareem had spoken at the LA Black Youth Conference which was put together by Harry Edwards. At the conference, Jabbar spoke in front of 200 black athletes in efforts of a potential boycott at the next Olympic Games; he gave one of the most moving speeches for the civil rights movement where he witnessed a cop shooting at a black man in Harlem around many innocent colored people.

“... But the cop didn’t care... I found out last summer that we don’t catch hell because we aren’t basketball stars or because we don’t have money. We catch hell because we are Black. Somewhere, each of us has to make a stand against this kind of thing. This is how I take my stand- using what i have. And I take my stand here.”

According to Edwards, it was the “ the most dynamic and memorable speech given for a boycott.” When Jabbar and five of his peers withdrew from the Olympic basketball tryouts, the news went viral and Kareem even starred on

the Today show. He went on to announce that “ America isn’t really my country.” After such baffled reactions, he went on to clarify that it wasn’t his country until “ things are on an equitable basis.” Jabbar continued, “ We have been a racist country nation with first class citizens and my decision not to go to the Olympics is my way of getting my message across.” Many historians speculate that the tour of Jabbar and his peers would have been the most successful, but it was limited by the player’s adversity to American policy.

Following these events, Jabbar went on to “ fulfill his obligations to the black community,” as did other African American athletes and important figures such as Muhammad Ali. Being such an infamous boxer around the world, he went on to speak against racial inequality, and even became one of the most important symbols of “ black power.” He changed his name from Cassius Clay, which was his slave name, to Muhammad Ali. Although commentators still refused to use his new name, Ali became the second most important Islam American figure after Malcolm X.

African American Athletes were not only used as political adjuncts for foreign policy, but also became infamous symbols of the civil rights movement. The physical manifestation of “ black power” resided in Muhamad Ali, the movement of Smith’s and Carlos’ raised fists at the Olympics- the challenge of segregation faced by colored people proved beneficial to the civil rights movement. At the same time, black athletes were used to reverse the image that America had established after exposure of their treatment to the colored. With this said, the African American culture proved to be used as an intermediary for foreign and domestic policy yet despite such challenges, the <https://assignbuster.com/african-american-athletes-and-their-role-in-foreign-and-domestic-policy/>

colored community found ways to fight for their civil rights while being puppeteered by the American government.

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